

CAMEROON 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, although the government requires religious groups to register and can suspend the activities of those that do not do so. The government has not registered any new religious groups since 2010. Although most religious groups operated without interference, the government temporarily closed at least 34 churches that it accused of disturbing public order.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom issues with government officials. Embassy officers met with prominent figures from all religious groups throughout the country, and the embassy hosted an iftar with members of the Muslim community to discuss tolerance and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 20.5 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2005 census, the most recent available, 69 percent of the population is Christian, 21 percent Muslim, and 6 percent animist. Groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jews and Bahais. About 38 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 26 percent is Protestant, 4 percent belongs to other Christian denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses, and less than 1 percent is Orthodox Christian.

Muslims and Christians live in every region, although Christians are concentrated primarily in the southern and western regions. Large cities have significant populations of both groups. The two Anglophone regions of the country are largely Protestant, and the eight Francophone regions are mostly Catholic. In the northern regions, the dominant Fulani (or Peuhl) ethnic group is mainly Muslim, but the overall population in those regions is fairly evenly divided among Muslims, Christians, and followers of indigenous religions, who are mostly located in rural areas. The Bamoun ethnic group of the West Region is predominately Muslim. Many Muslims, Christians, and members of other faiths also adhere to some aspects of African animist beliefs.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, but the government requires religious groups to register and can suspend the activities of those that do not do so or that engage in activities deemed to be inconsistent with the basis upon which they registered.

The constitution provides for the right of individuals to choose, practice, and change their religion. The constitution also guarantees the right of any citizen to sue the government for the violation of any constitutionally protected freedom.

The law on freedom of association governs relations between the government and religious groups. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINATD) and the presidency must approve and register religious groups to establish them as a legal organization and enable them to operate. Although the law prescribes no specific penalties for operating without official recognition, the government may suspend the activities of unregistered groups. Indigenous animist groups, however, are not required to register.

To register, a religious group must legally qualify as a religious congregation, defined as “any group of natural persons or corporate bodies whose vocation is divine worship” or “any group of persons living in community in accordance with a religious doctrine.” The religious group must submit a request for authorization, including the group’s charter describing planned activities, the names and functions of the group’s officials, and a declaration of commitment to comply with the law on freedom of association, to the relevant divisional (local level) office, who then forwards the documents to MINATD. MINATD reviews the file and sends it to the presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. The president may then grant authorization by presidential decree. Official recognition confers no general tax benefits but allows religious groups to receive real estate as a tax-free gift for the conduct of their activities, allows missionaries to receive visas with longer validity, and permits public gathering and worship.

MINATD may issue an order to suspend any religious group for “disturbing public order,” which is not defined in the law, and the president may dissolve any previously authorized religious organization that “deviates from its initial focus.”

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Mosques are controlled by local traditional rulers, who appoint and dismiss imams at their discretion.

The Ministry of Basic Education and the Ministry of Secondary Education require private schools that religious groups operate to meet the same curriculum, infrastructure, and teacher-training standards as state-operated schools.

Government Practices

In August the government closed at least 34 churches nationwide, most of which were unregistered. Local administration officials accused the predominantly evangelical churches of disturbing public order with raucous services, extorting the spiritually vulnerable, destabilizing family structure, and practicing unsafe “spiritual medicine” such as exorcisms, which reportedly led to some deaths. The minister of communication publicly criticized the practice of encouraging worshippers to seek spiritual medicine in lieu of professional medical assistance. Church leaders publicly protested the closures, and many stated the justification the government used to close their churches had no basis. The government allowed all of the churches to reopen in early September.

The government was slow to approve the legal status of a number of religious groups, including some from the United States, whose applications have been pending for years in several cases. The government has approved only one religious group in the last 15 years and none since 2010. According to MINATD, incomplete application submissions and lengthy background investigations contributed to approval delays. Although by law groups must register, numerous unregistered small religious groups operated freely due to the government’s policy of “administrative tolerance.” While only 47 religious groups are legally registered, hundreds more operated without official government authorization.

The government did not register indigenous religious groups, characterizing the practice of traditional religion as a private concern observed by members of a particular ethnic or kinship group or the residents of a particular locality.

The state-sponsored television station and radio stations regularly broadcast Christian and Islamic religious services and religious ceremonies on national holidays and during national events. Government ministers or the president often attended these ceremonies.

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The government provided an annual subsidy to all private primary and secondary education institutions, including those religious denominations operated.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly discussed religious freedom issues with government officials. Embassy representatives also met with prominent representatives from all principal religious groups to discuss challenges to religious freedom, outreach among religious groups, religious tolerance, and administrative issues. In interactions with the government, embassy officials advocated for greater transparency and efficiency in approving the status of religious groups. The embassy also raised the temporary closure of at least 34 churches with the government. Government officials said they believed some church leaders were destabilizing families by encouraging divorce and trying to take advantage of their adherents for economic ends.

The embassy hosted an iftar with members of the Muslim community to discuss tolerance and religious freedom.